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JOHN F. REICHERT

Description and Interpretation in Literary Criticism

IN THIS PAPER I want to consider several related questions about the logical nature of the kinds of statements literary critics make about individual works, questions like: What kinds of critical statements are descriptive or factual, to which the terms *true* or *false* are consequently applicable? What kinds of statements are interpretive or explanatory, hence best thought of as more or less plausible or valid rather than as true or false? What *is* interpretation in literary criticism? Is there, for a given work, one "right" interpretation? There are, of course, critics for whom the kinds of distinctions aimed at here smack too much of scientism. But I take it that the importance of making such distinctions is obvious enough for anyone concerned with criticism as a potentially rational activity. One sometimes wishes to separate the reading of a novel or play founded upon a whim (however imaginative) from the reading based on "the facts" of the work, whatever that phrase may mean. And one also wishes, occasionally, to reduce the history of criticism to some sort of order by winnowing the bogus from the real issues. The critic's muse is a polemical one. Perhaps his happiest achievements depend upon her sometimes prejudiced zeal. But the reader of criticism, and perhaps the critic too, can profit from the attempt to understand what sort of a venture, logically considered, criticism is.

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The two fullest recent accounts of the logic of criticism are to be found in Joseph P. Margolis's *The Language of Art and Art Criticism*[1] and Morris Weitz's *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*.[2] Their answers to the questions raised above are similar, and since I take substantial exception to their views, even while concurring with their goals, I shall use their views as the foci of my argument. Since Weitz's remarks are tied, closely and usefully, to positions that practicing critics have actually held, I shall take advantage especially of his painstaking researches into the history of *Hamlet* criticism. Most of my conclusions, therefore, will relate directly to the description and interpretation of plays. Novels and narrative poems may raise a few special problems, but I shall for the most part leave it to the reader to make the necessary adjustments in moving from drama criticism to criticism of the other genres.

I

At the beginning of his chapter on description, after a detailed survey of the opinions of the major *Hamlet* critics, Weitz asks: "Can we find anything in *Hamlet* about which there can be no doubt or about which if there are doubts and debate, these can be resolved by a direct appeal to the various elements, char-

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acteristics, and relations of the play?" "What are the *données* in *Hamlet*?" Without hesitation or consideration he announces the answer:

> Among the elements, distinguishable if not in all instances separable from each other, are the various characters, their traits, speech and actions; the dialogue, soliloquies, versification, prose, and language; and the plot, with its individual episodes.[3]

Characters, their traits, speeches, actions, the plot—these, according to Weitz, are the data of the play, about which critics can make verifiable, true statements, and to which, presumably, further statements of an interpretive or evaluative nature would have to appeal as evidence. A descriptive statement is one which reports, either truly or falsely, the *données* of the play. And only descriptions can rightly be called true or false.

Margolis's list of the describable elements of literary works generally is identical to Weitz's in every respect:

> In all the arts, furthermore, there is an indisputable range of comments that will be descriptive in the narrowest possible sense... in the literary and dramatic arts, plot, action, characters, vocabulary, rhythm, rhyme, style of language, and the like are said to be described.[4]

Useful as these pronouncements seem, one can, I think, question their authority. Neither list of *données* is, after all, a conclusion that follows with necessity from the criticism surveyed. Nor are they presented to us as deducible from propositions about the nature of literature or drama. And the more one ponders this assortment of givens, the more aware one becomes of the lack of any apparent rationale for it. Why, for example, are characters and character traits included while themes, say, are not? Why is the plot included but not the intended effect of the work upon the audience? There may be a perfectly good reason, but if there is one we ought to have it stated. Drawing up a list of the facts of literature or drama involves us immediately in the traditional questions and problems of critical theory, and selection by fiat will not do.

Part of the traditional difficulty of determining the facts of literature is caught up in Weitz's slippery metaphor, "direct appeal." What does it really mean to say that a descriptive statement is one that can be verified or refuted by a "direct appeal to the various elements, characteristics, and relations of the play"? What do we do, as readers, when we "appeal directly"? A description of a painting might be verified by *looking at* the colors and shapes, by *seeing* similarities among them, and so on; and Weitz sometimes uses "look" and "apprehend" instead of "appeal to." But clearly we do not test a statement like "Hamlet is melancholy"—which Weitz accepts as both descriptive and true—by literally looking at Hamlet. Perhaps we could say that *reading* is to a literary work what *looking at* is to a painting, so that verification would simply involve re-reading. But reading a play (or watching one) is itself a complex operation, and before we can make sense out of Weitz's phrase we must have some notion of what a play is and how we come to know it or experience it.

Is there, short of a full-scale ontological account of drama, a way of selecting the verifiable critical statements about it from the non-verifiable ones? Perhaps we can at least accomplish the less ambitious goal of providing a rule for *dis*qualifying certain kinds of statements, and arrive at a list of *données* by a process of elimination.

It seems to be true of Weitz's explanatory or interpretive propositions generally that they are logically related to other propositions about the work, while descriptions, according to Weitz, are "logically independent of explanation." [5] And the plausibility or force of explanatory statements depends in part upon the validity of the logic and the plausibility of the other propositions themselves. Thus, to choose an obvious example, the statement "Hamlet delays because he is melancholy" depends not only upon the truth of the statements "Hamlet delays" and "Hamlet is melancholy" but also upon the relative inadequacy of other explanations for his delay, the absence of evidence to the contrary, and so on. Surely any statement so dependent upon other propositions, themselves tentative at best, could not itself be considered descriptive.

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Let us return, with this notion in mind, to Margolis's and Weitz's lists. Are the characters in a work describable "in the narrowest possible sense"? Are character traits—the attitudes, temperaments, motives, and so on—of the characters in *Hamlet données*? Are Hamlet's alleged madness, his melancholy, pessimism, obscenity properly regarded, as Weitz regards them, as things of which, once we understand how to use those terms, there can be no doubt whatsoever? I submit that mental traits and attitudes are no more *given* in a play than they are in real life. The ascription of traits to the characters does indeed rest upon further assumptions about the play, and such ascriptions are properly regarded as hypothetical explanations, incapable of verification in any strict sense. We do not, after all, observe attitudes and states of mind. We observe behavior and infer its causes. What is more, in most situations we have several kinds of behavior to go on—language, tone of voice, gesture, facial expression, and so on. In a play we are not even given the meaning of the speaker's words, much less his tone of voice, his intention, his state of mind.

Consider, for example, Ernest Jones, who builds his Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's behavior on several alleged facts in the play, one of the chief among which is Gertrude's "passionate fondness for her son." [6] How do we know that Gertrude was passionately fond of Hamlet? Jones directs our attention to Act IV, Scene vii, where Claudius says of Hamlet, "The Queen his mother lives almost by his looks." But Jones's interpretation of Claudius's remark depends for its plausibility upon the assumption that Claudius means what he says. And that assumption, since Claudius is in the process of thinking up reasons to assuage Laertes's suspicions as fast as he can, is a rather dubious one. We do not even know that Claudius *thinks* Gertrude passionately fond of Hamlet.

Or again, consider the many critics who use the famous "What a piece of work is man" speech as direct evidence for Hamlet's past and present traits, his former optimism, his present disenchantment. But that speech, too, occurs in a context. Hamlet is talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom he knows to have been sent to spy on him and discover what is really on his mind!

I am not arguing that Gertrude is not fond of Hamlet, or that Hamlet is not an optimist *manqué*. I am simply pointing out that the process of arriving at such conclusions, or any conclusions about what is going on in a character's mind, involves complicated hypothesizing, not direct appeal. *Hamlet* is an excellent example of the necessity of regarding any statements made about the characters and their thoughts and actions as interpretive rather than descriptive, for it is a play which constantly invites the reader to re-interpret earlier speeches in the light of subsequent ones—Claudius's first speech to the court, say, in the light of the ghost's later revelations, or Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia in the nunnery scene in the light of his behavior at her funeral.[7] And as a play which deals persistently with deceit, there is hardly a line in it the interpretation of which does not depend upon our sense of its speaker's sincerity and rhetorical purposes.

We considered earlier the hypothetical nature of the assertion "Hamlet delays because he is melancholy." It ought now to be clear that the two substatements must both be regarded as hypothetical too. Even Hamlet's alleged delay is by no means given in the play, for the notion of delay itself suggests attitudes (doubt, or wariness, or something of the sort) and assumes some sense of how long it ought to take a young prince to avenge the death of his father when his father's murderer now occupies the throne.

If character traits, attitudes, motives, and the like are properly regarded as more or less plausible inferences based upon (or explanations of) what the characters say, what about the plot or action of a work? Is what happens in a play describable? In the first place, of course, any but the barest accounts of plot will include the characters' motives, and must therefore be regarded as interpretive rather than descriptive. But what about a simple, seemingly factual statement like "Hamlet

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stabbed Polonius"? Such a statement is different from statements about mental traits in that it refers to an action which could be observed in real life, and in real life it would be regarded as descriptive.

In a play, however (except where there are stage directions, which must be regarded as conventional means of providing data), such statements are again inferences drawn from what the characters say. There is no way to "appeal directly" to them. They are interpretations of the dialogue, dependent for their plausibility on the absence of contrary evidence, the lack of a better interpretation, and so on. Thus we learn that Hamlet stabs Polonius from the latter's "What hoa, Helpe, helpe, helpe"; from Hamlet's "How now, A rat? Dead for a ducate, dead"; and from Polonius's "Oh, I am slaine." It would require, one supposes, an innocent reader to fail to guess at what had happened during that exchange. But the degree of probability that our interpretation of these lines possesses is not at issue here. The question is whether the statement "Hamlet stabbed Polonius" is arrived at by a different process than an explanatory statement like "Hamlet is melancholy." We want to know whether such propositions are descriptive "in the narrowest possible sense," whether they are or are not "logically independent of explanation."

Let me introduce a further example to clarify the matter. There has been some hassling among critics over the question of whether Claudius sees the dumbshow which precedes the mousetrap play in III, ii. The question arises because, though the dumbshow dramatizes something very much like Claudius's own crime, he responds to it not at all. Moments later, however, he *does* react to the mousetrap play. Now one may hold any one of several views of why Claudius did not respond to the dumbshow: he did not see it; he saw it but did not understand its significance for him; he understood it but suppressed his feelings, and so on. I can imagine arguments being drawn up for and against any one of these positions, but I cannot see that any of them is verifiable either in principle or in fact. Clearly they are explanations, more or less plausible, of Claudius's silence.

If we put the two statements together—"Hamlet stabbed Polonius" and "Claudius saw the dumbshow"—their logical similarity is apparent. Hamlet's stabbing Polonius is an explanation (albeit a sound one) of the dialogue, just as Claudius's seeing or not seeing the dumbshow are explanations of dialogue. There are differences in the total situations—critics have discovered a problem in one case but not, as yet, in the other—but these differences do not call for a distinction between the logical nature of the two statements.

We have eliminated from the list of *données* everything but the language of the play, and it seems to me that we must do so if we are to avoid the confused ideas of truth, factualness, and evidence that a philosophic critique of criticism ought to reveal. The only *données* of a play—the only elements about which true or false descriptive statements can be made—are, to borrow an answer from Hamlet, "words, words, words." We can describe the words of the text that we have agreed to talk about, together with whatever stage directions or other conventional kinds of information we agree to accept.

It is important to stress the role of agreement in arriving at the text, particularly in dealing with a play like *Hamlet* for which there is no one "true" text. Disagreements arise both on a large scale (which parts of which Quartos are we talking about?) and on a small scale (did Hamlet wish that his sallied, sullied, or solid flesh would melt?). But we settle such disagreements in a very different fashion from disputes about interpretation, either by weighing historical evidence on the basis of certain arbitrary principles, or simply by consenting to talk about this text rather than that, acknowledging the ways in which different versions might necessitate different interpretations.

To insist that the only facts we have to deal with are the words of the play is not to identify the words with the play. The play is much more than the words, but the words are our avenue to it. Recognition of this fact accords nicely with much of our

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everyday, common-sense talk about literary works: we ask for interpretations and explanations of individual words, lines, and speeches; and we settle our questions and disputes by "going back to the text."

So radically empirical a view of the logic of descriptive statements in criticism seems to allow the critic little room to breathe, much less to speak. One does not want to say of statements like "Hamlet sometimes behaves rashly," or "Hamlet saw the king at prayer," or "Ophelia went mad" that they are plausible, or adequate, or indeed very likely. One wants to say that they are true as anything that matters can be, and that they are properly regarded as factual. The solution to this dilemma would seem to lie in recognizing a sort of pyramid of statements, building on the solid foundation of the words and toward the more and more patently interpretive. There is a world of characters and actions, implied by the words, upon which the community of readers agrees. Statements made about that world look descriptive and factual, and there is no harm in treating them as such, so long as we recognize that it is a world very hazy and very complex, and that it is finally subject to challenge and to misinterpretation at every point. Since it is thus subject, however, we must insist upon the following rule: statements that go beyond the words, to their meanings, their speakers, and the actions of these speakers are inferential, and always depend logically upon other assumptions about the play. Their plausibility is judged in the same way, finally, that we judge the more comprehensive kinds of literary interpretation.

II

We turn now to interpretation and explanation themselves. These include, within the work, statements about why characters behave as they do, and about the significance of characters and events; and, concerning the work as a whole, statements about what genre it belongs to, what it means, how it is designed to effect the audience, and so on. Weitz insists that "readings" of a work, interpretations of it, understandings of it, and the like, are all, in essence, explanation, since all involve hypothetical reasoning at some point. Margolis holds to the more traditional "interpretation."

Margolis's view of the logic of interpretive statements is succinctly summarized in the following paragraph:

> The philosophically most interesting feature of critical interpretation is its tolerance of alternative and seemingly contrary hypotheses. We should not allow incompatible descriptions of any physical object to stand: at least one would require correction, else we would find that the disparities were due to the different purposes the descriptions were to serve or the different circumstances under which they were rendered. But given the goal of interpretation, we do not understand that an admissible account necessarily precludes all others incompatible with itself. Stephen Pepper, we may note, has always insisted that there is some ideal object of criticism toward which all relevant experiences of a given work converge. Monroe Beardsley holds a similar view. But if we simply examine the practice of critics, I think we shall find no warrant at all for the claim.[8]

Margolis has put the issue as he sees it very clearly: either there is, for a given work, an ideal interpretation at which criticism aims, or we must "allow" incompatible interpretations of the same work. The assumption seems to be: all different interpretations of a given work must be incompatible with each other. Margolis, assuming what he calls the "logical weakness" of criticism, is willing to allow them to stand. Unfortunately he does not provide examples of incompatible interpretations, so it would be unfair to try to second guess him on the question of what incompatible interpretations of the same work might be like. Before turning, however, to Weitz's similar but more developed position, I should point out that in the case of an essentially ambiguous work one would indeed allow incompatible interpretations to stand. To say that much is tautological. But I can think of no other case in which one would or should allow them.

Weitz concludes from his survey of *Hamlet* criticism that, the logical nature of criticism being what it is, "there is no true, best, correct or right explanation, reading, interpretation, or understanding of *Hamlet*." This is so, he argues, for two

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reasons: first, there is no way of determining the best critical approach or "category of explanation" to use; second, interpretations of *Hamlet* (or of any play) depend for their validity upon the truth of the more general hypotheses (historical, psychological, or aesthetic, for example) from which they are derived. These general hypotheses being themselves uncertain, the interpretations that critics derive from them are equally, if not more uncertain.[9]

Weitz arrives, then, at a position similar to Margolis's: we must recognize several "competing" (the term is Weitz's synonym for "incompatible") explanations or interpretations of the same work, none of them "right" or "correct," each of them "more or less adequate in terms of the clarity, relevance, and completeness" which it possesses.[10]

I wish to challenge the view that the limitations of critical interpretation are due either to difficulties inherent in the nature of critical discourse or to the dependence of interpretation upon more general hypotheses about life and art. I also want to challenge the assumption, shared by both Margolis and Weitz, that the only alternative to the view that criticism aims at one correct interpretation is the acceptance of mutually incompatible or competing interpretations. But the process by which Weitz reaches his conclusions is a lengthy one, and it will be necessary to retrace some of the steps in it to reveal the nature of his error.

Weitz's misunderstanding of the nature of interpretation is the product of his failure to distinguish between the real and the bogus quarrels among the critics he treats. Consider, for example, the following paragraph. Weitz has been summarizing the "historical interpretations" of E. E. Stoll, L. L. Schücking, and finally Theodore Spencer:

> Spencer offers his explanation of *Hamlet* as the best one. Other critics disagree. Indeed, each of the historical critics already discussed disagrees: Stoll claims that the best explanation of *Hamlet* is as a revenge tragedy with an ideal hero; Schucking says that it consists in *Hamlet's* being understood as a revenge tragedy with a fashionable melancholy hero; and so on. Clearly, now, if there is the best explanation of *Hamlet*, not *all* of these competing ones can be it.[11]

Weitz has imposed upon the three interpretations a competition for a prize. (Of course the critics in their fervor sometimes see themselves in this way too.) And he will arrive at his pessimistic conclusions about the cognitive potential of interpretive criticism on the basis of the sheer number of *competing* interpretations. But are these three interpretations properly regarded as competing, as incompatible, or mutually exclusive? One first becomes suspicious when one rereads Spencer and discovers that he nowhere makes any claims to the effect that his is the best interpretation of *Hamlet*. In fact he is not even offering an interpretation of the whole play. Rather, he is trying to explain what he calls the increase in the "largeness" or "universality" of the characters and events of *Hamlet* compared to those of the earlier plays.[12]

There would seem to be a conflict, however, between Stoll's "ideal hero" and Schücking's "fashionable melancholy hero." But then one opens the pages of Stoll and comes upon the statement: "Hamlet is melancholy... like the other Elizabethan revengers."[13] As Stoll uses the terms, there is no contradiction in regarding Hamlet as both ideal and melancholy, and there is no disagreement between Stoll and Schücking, at least on this score.

The important question can be formulated in spite of the absence of critical disagreement: Spencer sees a tension in Hamlet's thinking between "the traditional optimistic view of the nature of man" and a disillusionment like that which was being expressed with eloquence by many of Shakespeare's contemporaries. Is that view of Hamlet in conflict or competition with a view of Hamlet as a melancholy revenge hero? Given two different views of Hamlet —seeing him in two different contexts, as it were—does it follow that one of those views must be wrong?

Or again, Lily B. Campbell interprets *Hamlet* as an exemplum illustrating the tragic consequences of excessive grief.[14] Many critics have objected to the particular

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theme she reads the play as exemplifying, but doing so is not at all the same as disqualifying or disagreeing with her general critical approach, which seeks to formulate the thesis which the play is designed to exemplify. We can, then, expand our theoretical question: Is it contradictory to say that *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy, *and* a play dramatizing certain Elizabethan ideas, *and* an exemplum? To go a step further, would it necessarily contradict any of these views to interpret *Hamlet* as organized according to the pattern of an ancient myth or ritual?

I confess that I see no reason for thinking that there cannot be several, different, correct interpretations of the same play, employing different "categories of explanation," none of them incompatible with or competing against any other. They could only be regarded as incompatible if they were all seen (as Weitz sees them) as answers to the single question: What is *the best* interpretation of *Hamlet*? If one returns to the critics one finds, even when they claim to compete, that their interpretations are answers to very different questions, and one begins to suspect that the various terms *interpretation of, reading of, explanation of,* and so on, denote, albeit vaguely, real differences among the kinds of questions posed and answered.

Let me suggest briefly, then, something of the variety of *kinds* of explanation we would find if we set out to describe the logical multiplicity of *Hamlet* criticism:

1. Francis Fergusson offers us what he calls the "underlying theme" of *Hamlet:* "the attempt to find and destroy the hidden 'imposthume' which is poisoning the life of Claudius' Denmark." [15] He then goes on to show, first, that a great many individual scenes involve some sort of searching or inquiring activity, and second, that the whole play dramatizes Hamlet's search for the source of the evil in Denmark and his attempt to eradicate it. He is simply asking the question: What do the separate scenes in the play, looked at from the point of view of the purposes of the characters in them, have in common with each other, and they in turn with the total action of the protagonist?

2. Lily Campbell interprets the play as a whole as an exemplum. To do so is to ask what statement or related group of statements, if any, the work is designed to exemplify. The same question has been asked by other critics (H. D. F. Kitto, for example), and answered more skillfully. This approach is often called "thematic," but it is different from Fergusson's thematic interpretation, in that here "theme" denotes complete statements rather than recurrent actions or purposes.[16]

3. Ernest Jones spends most of his effort inquiring into the subconscious causes of Hamlet's behavior, and having explained it to his satisfaction, he goes on to ask what sort of a personality Shakespeare must have had to write a play with this particular psychological content.

4. Eliot, Robertson, and others attempt to account for certain features of the play in terms of its probable sources and the difficulties that they must have presented the playwright.[17] Eliot, for example, considered the play a failure (Hamlet's emotion is "in excess of the facts as they appear") and tried to account for its failure by looking at the likely sources of the play.

5. A great many critics interpret *Hamlet* as a revenge tragedy, or discuss Shakespeare's use of revenge conventions. Such interpretations can, logically, involve only two questions: In what ways is this play like certain other plays called revenge tragedies? And in what ways is it different from them?

6. Finally, almost all the critics mentioned, as well as Bradley, G. Wilson Knight, and others, employ rhetorical criticism on occasion, asking what emotional effects—feelings, expectations, attitudes, so on—the play is designed to produce in the audience. Perhaps the most extended examination of *Hamlet* in these terms is to be found in J. V. Cunningham's *Woe or Wonder: The Emotional Effect of Shakespearian Tragedy,*[18] in which Cunningham shows that many of the scenes in the tragedies are designed to produce a sense of wonder or admiration, as distinct from the traditional pity and fear.

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Perhaps this brief, selective survey will be sufficient to demonstrate how varied are the different activities that Weitz places in competition with each other. Each of these approaches, I submit, has its own logic, its own procedural rules, its own goals. The nature of the question the critic asks determines the kind of evidence that could substantiate or refute a given answer to it. Surely there is nothing inconsistent about saying that *Hamlet* is like *The Spanish Tragedy* in some respects, that it exemplifies such and such an idea, that many of its characters are alike in their confused and futile efforts to come to grips with the corruption that they dimly sense in the state, and so on. When we put the matter this way, it begins to look as though the critics are not always explaining the same phenomenon at all, but rather different aspects of it. While they may speak as if they were interpreting the whole play, they are in fact addressing themselves to very distinct aspects or features of it—its plot, its meaning, the motives of its characters, and so on.

In literary criticism, moreover, even a single fact or a single work taken as a whole can be (and ought to be) explained in different, compatible ways. Let us assume, for example, that we have agreed that Hamlet delays in carrying out the ghost's ambiguous commands. The question might then arise: How does one explain the delay? "Hamlet delays," the critic answers, "because he is melancholy." "No, no," we say, "We know *why* he delays. We want to know what the delay is there for." "Ah," says the critic, "I see. The delay is a conventional device in revenge tragedies, designed to create suspense." "No," we sigh. "You still don't understand our question. We want you to *explain* the delay. What does it mean? How does it relate to Shakespeare's over-all theme?" "I think I understand you now," says the critic. "Shakespeare is suggesting to us something of the frailty and futility of human actions and intentions. Hamlet's delay, together with the behavior of Laertes and Fortinbras, and the several speeches on memory and passion, serve to illustrate the subservience of human purposes to that divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."

This brief and unlikely dialogue is intended to suggest how shifty the concept of explanation is in literary criticism. Clearly none of these explanations of the same fact contradicts or precludes any of the others. Which explanation, or which category of explanation, Weitz would have us ask, is best? It depends, we would have to answer, on what we were asking for in the first place, or on what our interest was at the time. The question of what we *ought* to be interested in when we read a work clearly belongs outside of the study of the logic of interpretation.

III

Weitz is wrong, then, in saying that correct interpretations of *Hamlet* (or of any work) must wait upon the determination of the best critical method or category of explanation. (A critical method can only be deemed inappropriate by showing its failure to interpret well.) He is also wrong when he states that correct interpretations depend upon true accounts of the historical backgrounds of the play, or true accounts of human psychology. He challenges, for example, Spencer's explications of Hamlet's philosophical ideas on the grounds that Elizabethan philosophers held a large variety of views, and that Spencer's readings were not fully representative of the complex thought of the age.[19] Such a challenge indicates an erroneous view of the relationship between literary or historical scholarship, on the one hand, and criticism, on the other—a view too often held by scholars themselves—namely, that the facts established by scholarship are somehow related logically to the interpretations to which they give rise.

Of course if we are interpreting a work as actually allusive to a historical event, as with a satire or political allegory, so that the event is, in a sense, a part of the meaning of the work, then it would be necessary for the event to have taken place for our interpretation to be correct. But much of what we think of as historical criticism functions in a very different way. Whether

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the history consists of current beliefs, theatrical or literary conventions, stated intentions on the part of the author, or literary sources, it cannot provide us with premises from which necessarily correct interpretations can be deduced. History provides the critic, rather, with a rich source of ideas and possibilities of potential use in formulating interpretive hypotheses. Once the process of interpreting the work begins, the interpretation is logically severed from history and must stand on its own merits. An interpretation is not rendered correct by the truth of the historical considerations which led to it, nor incorrect by the discovery that the history which inspired it is incomplete or inaccurate. The usefulness of Spencer's comparisons of Hamlet's thought with that of Machiavelli and Montaigne depends not one whit upon the extent to which those two writers are representative of their age.

It is also difficult to see why the "plausibility" of Ernest Jones's Freudian explanation of Hamlet's behavior "depends at least in part on the adequacy of the general Freudian theory of psychoanalysis," [20] any more than a Christian interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* depends upon the truth of Christian doctrine, or a psychoanalytic reading of *Mourning Becomes Electra* depends upon the truth of psychoanalytic doctrine. If Hamlet's behavior can be best understood as the behavior of a young man trapped by the moral obligation to commit a deed the very thought of which arouses intense, previously repressed guilt feelings within his soul, then that explanation is the most plausible whether Freud accurately described the unconscious wellsprings of all human behavior or not.

The question of whether Freud must have been right for a Freudian interpretation of a literary work to be right should be carefully distinguished from other similar issues. The question has nothing to do with anachronism, or with intentions that the author simply could not have had. One may wish to dismiss, for good reasons, a reading of the *Aeneid* as alluding to the coming of Christ; but Freudian critics have never suggested, so far as I know, that *Hamlet* alludes to the coming of Freud or his theories—only that Hamlet behaves in ways for which psychoanalytic theory provides a good explanation.

On the other hand, I should not want to accept a Freudian interpretation of *any* work on the grounds advocated by Margolis, namely, that we of the mid-twentieth century "have assimilated the fascinating perspective and fictions that Freud invented." [21] Surely it is a mark of intelligent criticism to distinguish between cases where our fictions work and those where they do not, and to avoid being seduced by a "fascinating" theory into a universal application of it.

Perhaps what is needed is a commonsense distinction between plausibility (or validity) and probability. That is, the probability of discovering a valid explanation for Hamlet's behavior in psychoanalytic theory would be greater if that theory were universally true. The probability would be greater still if the writer were not Shakespeare but a modern (like O'Neill) who knew and admired Freud's works. But we should not confuse the remoteness or eccentricity of an explanatory model with its actual usefulness or adequacy in any particular situation. Jones's explanation, like any other which is not anachronistic, ought to be judged in terms of the consistency, the completeness, and the simplicity with which it explains the hero's behavior.

IV

Implicit in my objections to Weitz's and Margolis's analyses of the logic of criticism is a view of literary criticism that is neither new nor shocking. I have urged, in the first place that, since language is the medium of literature, the only statements the critic can make descriptive of a work are statements about its language. (He can also, of course, describe its historical, external relations—its date of composition, its reception, and so on—but such statements relate *facts about* the work, not *the facts of* the work.) This position does not imply that the most important statements critics make are statements about language, a view that underlay a good deal of the

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New Criticism. It implies only that all that we can refer to ("appeal directly to") in settling differences of interpretation is the text that we are interpreting.

I have argued further that the dichotomy between "the one correct interpretation" and a multiplicity of incompatible or competing interpretations is false. There are, in principle, several correct and compatible interpretations of any single work. This is so because *interpretation* and *explanation* are ambiguous concepts, at least in the field of literary criticism. When we ask *why* Hamlet delays, *why* Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet,* or *why* there is so much disease imagery in the play, the word *why* is ambiguous in every case. We are not always seeking, when we ask such questions, the kind of answer that a scientist often seeks: antecedent conditions or rules from which the phenomenon in question might have been predicted or deduced. Indeed one may question whether critical interpretations are, as Margolis assumes, "logically weak" by their very nature. Illogical and weak interpretations there have been aplenty. But they are the products of individual critics who can make mistakes. Equally defensible but incompatible interpretations of the same work are a sign of the ambiguity, either intentional or otherwise, of the work itself.

I should perhaps make it clear at this point (in case I have been taken to be arguing that all interpretations of all works are correct!) that many of the interpretations of *Hamlet* surveyed by Weitz are incompatible with each other either in whole or in part, though not so often as the critics' competitive language implies. And many of them are, as they stand, inconsistent or excessively complicated. But the reasons for these facts are to be sought either in the critics' individual vagaries or deep within the nature of the play itself, not in the logical nature of critical discourse.

What the philosophy of literary criticism needs (and this may apply to criticism of the other arts as well) is a recognition of the diversity of legitimate critical activities that fall under the general rubrics of *explanation* and *interpretation*. Such a recognition demands investigations far beyond the scope of this paper, but I am tempted to conclude by taking further advantage of Weitz's researches to suggest that the various interpretations of *Hamlet* that he summarizes fall rather naturally into three categories, distinct in their methods and goals even when pursued simultaneously by an individual critic:

1. In the first place there are those explanations which attempt to account for certain features of the work by reference to antecedent conditions in the author's life or times. This category would include Jones's attempt to account for the psychoanalytic content of the play by postulating certain hypotheses about "the inner workings of Shakespeare's mind." It would also include T. S. Eliot's attempt to account for the "failure" of *Hamlet* as a work of art by postulating an incongruity between Shakespeare's conception of Hamlet's character and the plots of Shakespeare's sources. Finally, it would include Spencer's attempt (distinct from his clarification of Hamlet's thought) to explain the difference between *Hamlet* and the earlier plays by postulating a new awareness on Shakespeare's part of some of the complexities of the Elizabethan intellectual milieu.

It seems to be the case that such explanations are sought when the critic senses a problem in the work—an artistic flaw, or a divergence from the author's previous style. They are properly thought of as historical or causal, and are usually found in what we think of as literary history rather than in critical interpretations of a single work. They should be distinguished from what is usually called historical criticism, or the historical approach to literary works, which treats history as a source for possible literary models (revenge plots, character types, themes, and so on) which may prove fruitful in carrying out the kinds of analysis discussed in the following paragraphs.

2. Several of the critics raise traditional literary questions about the meaning that the work is designed to convey, or the intellectual or emotional response that the work is designed to produce. Interpretation of this sort attempts to discover the

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aims of the work, and the standard method is to postulate a given meaning (theme, thesis, view of life, and so on) or effect (pity, fear, suspense, surprise) and to analyze the work showing how all or most of its parts can be well understood as designed for that purpose. One interesting example of this sort of analytic criticism is E. E. Stoll's attempt, subsidiary to his general rhetorical analysis of the play, to demonstrate how the work is designed to prevent us from dwelling upon Hamlet's responsibility for the deaths of Ophelia, Polonius, and Laertes, deaths which could have been handled in such a way as to arouse very different attitudes toward the hero. One might characterize this kind of interpretation as a search for a principle of organization in terms of which the work or an episode within it may be seen to possess a sort of unity.

3. Another kind of interpretation involves the application to the work of analogues or patterns. H. D. F. Kitto interprets *Hamlet* in terms derived from his study of Greek religious drama; Stoll and others apply the pattern of revenge drama; Bradley employs a psychological variant of Aristotle's definition of tragedy; Francis Fergusson compares and contrasts *Hamlet* with *Oedipus Rex*. The goal of applying such analogues may be an analysis like that described in the preceding section, or it may be the illumination of some particular aspect of the work—plot, mood, characterization, and so on.

An interesting feature of this style of criticism is that the analogue (whether derived from literary sources or from some other human activity like religious ritual or holiday festivities) need not be very like the play to be highly instructive. Nor, of course, need it have been known to Shakespeare. Weitz is quite right in insisting that one cannot establish with finality that *Hamlet* or any play is or is not a tragedy, or a revenge tragedy (since these are open classes), except in so far as one is willing to accept arbitrary definitions of these and the like classes for pragmatic purposes; and the chief danger of criticism by analogue is indeed the temptation to deduce characteristics of the work being interpreted from the characteristics of the analogue (e.g., "Since Hamlet is a man of noble stature, and since his story evokes pity and fear, his misfortune must have been produced by a flaw in his character.")

Criticism by analogue works on the principle of using the known to explore the unknown, the simple (a brief description of a typical tragic plot, say) to illuminate the complex. Generally speaking it begins with cause-effect relationships in the work that are not fully understood, speeches and characters whose significance is perceived only dimly. Then, with similar but simpler patterns of cause and effect, or significance, in mind, our questions about the work begin to be answered. Once the correspondences have been established, the critic can begin to make the distinction which emphasizes the unique features of the play. (Helen Gardner, for example, applies certain shared features of earlier revenge plays to *Hamlet,* then explores Shakespeare's development of these features in new directions to fulfill possibilities "only half perceived by his lesser contemporaries.")[22]

Such criticism is obviously well suited to teaching literature, since, like metaphor, the analogue throws certain meanings or rhythms of the play into visible relief. The uses the critic makes of his analogue are subject to correction at every step—there is a difference between imposing a pattern on a work and illuminating one that is already there—but it is difficult to imagine a way of ruling out any kind of analogue on a priori grounds.

[1] Joseph P. Margolis, *The Language of Art and Art Criticism* (Detroit, 1965).

[2] Morris Weitz, *Hamlet and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (Chicago, 1964).

[3] Weitz, pp. 228–229.

[4] Margolis, p. 82.

[5] Weitz, p. 244.

[6] *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York, 1949), p. 91.

[7] I owe this and the following observation to Elder Olson's "*Hamlet* and the Hermeneutics of Drama," *MP,* LXI (1964), 225–237.

[8] Margolis, pp. 91–92.

[9] Weitz, pp. 255–259.

[10] Weitz, p. 317.

[11] Weitz, p. 75.

[12] *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York, 1942), pp. 93–94.

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[13] *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare: A Study in Dramatic Illusion and Contrast* (Cambridge, Eng., 1933), p. 119.

[14] *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge, Eng., 1930, repr. New York, 1959), pp. 109–147.

[15] *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton, 1949), chap. II. Weitz (pp. 95–105) distorts Ferguson's view radically, twisting it around to mean almost the opposite of what it does mean. Fergusson does *not* interpret *Hamlet* as a ritual "which celebrates the mystery of human life." According to Fergusson the play *contains* such rituals, presenting them "in a tragic, ironic light." He contrasts *Hamlet* sharply with *Oedipus Rex* in this respect, and by no means "reduce[s] . . . *Hamlet* to *Oedipus Rex*"! (Weitz, pp. 103–104).

[16] *Exemplum* is sometimes used to refer to narrowly doctrinaire works. I mean to denote any work whose plot is designed to be generalized in some way, much as the story of Oedipus leads the chorus to comment: "Let no man be called fortunate until his death."

[17] See Weitz, p. 37–48.

[18] (Denver, 1951).

[19] Weitz, p. 74.

[20] Weitz, p. 21.

[21] Margolis, p. 88.

[22] *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 41–51.

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